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An Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) of Tourist Activities and Amenities in Cuba

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Purpose of Study

Cuba has been the forbidden fruit of travel for U.S. citizens for over 50 years. Recently Cuba made a major shift in its economic policies, laying off 500,000 government employees and opening opportunities for a more entrepreneurial economic approach. Cuba's economy and society will undoubtedly change as the political climate is more open to entrepreneurship and outside investment. Tourism is on the brink of entering a new era of development as the political structure continues to change. The purpose of this study is to conduct an importance-performance analysis (IPA) of tourist activities and amenities in Cuba. Using IPA, our research will allow us to target areas with strategies of development, conservation, interpretation, training, marketing and/ or community involvement. With the potential influx of tourists that would occur from the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo, this information would be beneficial to the myriad of stakeholders in the tourism industry.

Literature Review

Cuba has had a long and complicated history with tourism. The thriving tourism industry in the 1950s, followed by Castro's labeling of international tourism as a "hedonistic vice" (Knight & Sharpley, 2008), and the present-day tourism resurgence all form significant chapters in Cuba's tourism development history.

According to Knight and Sharpley (2008), tourism arrivals to Cuba have increased from 340,000 in 1990 to over 2.3 million in 2005. The authors note that the number of hotel rooms available more than tripled in the same period, and despite the increase in the volume of tourists, average receipts from tourism expenditures were 30% less in 2005 than they were in 1996. Knight and Sharpley go on to say that an increase in airfare, a 12% commission on credit-card currency withdrawals and a \$25 departure tax has eroded average tourist receipts. These fees, as well as Cuba's growing reputation for poor service quality (Elliott & Neirotti 2008), are issues Cuba must address for tourism to continue to grow.

Elliott & Neirotti (2008) conducted a visitor survey that revealed important results. More than half of respondents felt that Cuba was not a good value for the price. Only 10% of those surveyed agreed that Cuba "is a high quality destination." With about 70% of hotel rooms in the Havana and Varadero tourism centers, the authors conclude that "Cuba needs to upgrade its tourism products and services and adopt new strategies that attract more environmentally- and socially-responsive markets in addition to packaged tourism" (p. 397).

The loosening of the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba could provide an influx of American tourists to Cuba. Sanders & Long (2002) project that if the embargo is completely lifted, close to 3 million annual U.S. visitors by the fifth year. Although that is a significant assumption, any loosening of the trade embargo is likely to increase American tourism to Cuba.

In order to prepare for continued growth in tourism arrivals, Cuba must know what it is doing well with and what needs improvement. Anderson, Groves, Lengfelder, and Timothy (2001) employed IPA as a training tool for residents wishing to bolster tourism in their community. The residents visited and scored attributes of another locale to gain first-hand knowledge of what "worked" and what didn't in a tourism destination. The nine destination attributes scored in this study were: attractiveness of retail district, overall cleanliness, variety of stores, variety of different restaurants/bars, quality of products, price level, originality of signage and facades, parking and accessibility, and hospitality. The attributes will be adjusted so as to be appropriate for Cuba, and piloted with various experts familiar with Cuba, including representatives from Cuban tour operator companies, faculty at the University of Havana, and staff at the Ministry of Tourism. The research will provide a snapshot of what various visitor markets perceive as the most important factors in a sustainable tourism destination.

Methods

Surveys will be collected at tourism sites around Cuba that attract and tailor to a variety of tourism markets. Some areas of study include ecotourism in the Viñales Valley, sun, sea, and sand tourism in the Varadero beach resort area, and cultural tourism in Santiago and Trinidad. Surveys will be distributed both to tourist groups and individual travelers encountered. Tourists will rate how 'important' certain items are to their travel experience, and then how Cuba 'performs' on those same items. By plotting importance and performance scores along x and y-axes, four quadrants are formed that reveal the areas in which planners and managers should focus (Figure 1). The tourist's rankings will reveal the high importance-high performers (where Cuba is making high marks as a destination), as well as components that Cuba would benefit from developing further.

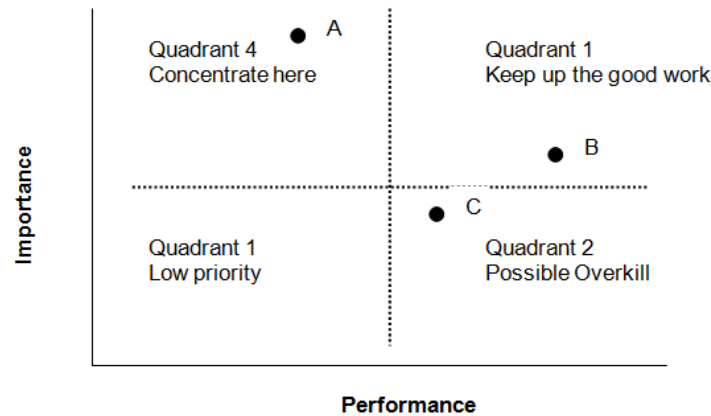


Figure 1. A Conceptual Sketch of Importance-Performance Analysis

Expected Outcomes

IPA identifies the areas where planners and managers should focus. In addition to having this general product development and marketing intelligence, planners can also focus efforts according to their target markets. The results of the study will segment the preferences of visitors according to their nationality, type of travel experience (eco vs. resort vs. cultural), and geographic region visiting. The IPA will also allow managers to consider elements along the tourism value chain that could be modified to better address visitor's concerns about sustainability.

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